

FEB Awards Reception
United States Customs House
Prepared Remarks of U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara
May 29, 2013

Thank you, Mike [Fitzpatrick, Chief SDNY Probation Officer], for that kind introduction. I would like to take a moment to thank:

- Chris Palin of the IRS and Chairman of the Federal Executive Board;
- Kevin Berry of the EEOC and the FEB's Vice Chairman;
- Tony Farthing, Vice Chair emeritus of the FEB and our master of ceremonies today; and
- Cynthia Gable, the Executive Director of the FEB who is responsible for putting together today's Employees of the Year program.

For me, and I hope for many of you, public service is never ultimately a sacrifice, as people sometimes suggest. I think it is a privilege, and it is an honor.

And more than anything else, it is an opportunity in many ways. It's an opportunity to attempt to pay down, in some small way, the deep debt that all of us owe to our community and country, which can never be fully repaid.

Muhammad Ali put it this way. He said, "Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth." Now if that is true, there are a lot of people – not people in this room – who owe a lot of back rent. We should talk to them at some point.

I have always felt, perhaps because I'm an immigrant to this country, a special obligation to give back to my community and to my country. That's been important in my family and that's the case because I look at where I am, given where I came from. Some of you may know I'm an immigrant from India. I know sometimes this event is held on Ellis Island. My family did not come through Ellis Island, they came through JFK. (They passed through secondary without any problems, by the way.)

My father was born in 1939 to a family that had a little bit of money, but this was before the subcontinent was divided into two countries, Pakistan and India, and during the time of Partition in 1947, he and his family left everything behind and had to travel from what was then India and became Pakistan to India with really nothing.

And as I've said on other occasions, he's a guy who was the first person in his family, he's one of thirteen kids, who went to college and appreciated what an education was all about. He came to this country when I was about two so he could have a better life for his family.

The idea that he has a son who, at a fairly young age (I tell my children I'm actually not old, I'm fairly young) with a name that no one can pronounce could be the chief federal law enforcement officer of the Southern District of New York is a pretty extraordinary thing. This is the only place in the world where that can happen and for that reason I think I feel an obligation for as long as I can and as long as my wife will let me, as long as there's at least a dollar or two in the bank, that I should give back as much as I can. I know all of you feel the same way also. It's pretty far that I've gotten given my father came from nothing and that I have subpoena powers.

What makes public servants special? I think the fact that they are committed and dedicated, and then among the ranks of public servants, the most special of them, the ones who are actually being honored today, the great public servants, what makes them special I think is that they go to bed every night asking a series of important questions. They ask basic questions that not enough people ask:

- What is wrong in the world?
- What is broken?
- What can be fixed?
- Where is there pain?
- Where is there suffering?
- Where is there injustice?

And then they ask the most important question of all: What can be done about it?

What can be done:

- To make the world a little more fair?
- Or a little bit more safe?
- Or a little bit more equal?
- Or a little bit more just?
- Or just a little bit more humane?

And then they wake up in the morning, the best public servants, and every day provide full-throated answers to those questions – not with hopelessness or handwringing, but through hard work, too often unheralded, but quietly undertaken nonetheless, because the point of their work is not a newspaper headline, but to have precious impact.

People spend their entire lives waiting for the opportunity to do something meaningful, to make a difference in the world, in their country or their community. For so many people, too many people, that opportunity never comes. And you who serve the public and are here today have that opportunity every single day.

But the special thing is not that you have the opportunity, is that you seize the opportunity, and have seized it. The sad thing is that precious few people do seize the opportunity, and that's a shame because everyone has the ability to serve and it's too bad that not more people do.

As Dr. King once said, expressing the sentiment better than I ever could, “Everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant.”

So, I thank you above all, and I think the country should all thank you also, for seizing opportunities to serve because they are available to everyone but not that many take the opportunity to do so.

It is the dedication to seizing those opportunities that we celebrate this afternoon. You represent the finest public servants in a city full of the most devoted, steadfast, and heroic public servants you can find anywhere in the country or anywhere in the world.

One thing I think you'll all agree with me on: it's popular in some places in America to denigrate public service and in particular government service. It makes me actually really angry when people walk around pointing fingers at government and saying that government is the problem. Now, government is not perfect, but I take personal offense sometimes when people seem to be talking about people like those who work in my office, and people like you, who sometimes sacrifice and sometimes receive low pay, who deserve so much credit. You make the country safer and better, and lives better for so many people. In my view, you should be getting raises, not being furloughed.

At a time when there is so much cynicism; when there is so much bleak talk about the future; at a time when so many people seemed concerned only about themselves, when so many people seem to care, excessively, about the buck and the bottom line, selfless public servants give people hope and faith – hope that idealism is not dead; and faith that idealism has a purpose and, most importantly, that purposeful idealism can have real impact – impact on the people whose rights are vindicated, whose communities are protected, whose life savings are returned, whose pleas are answered, and whose causes are championed.

So congratulations to all the winners today. Thank you for your service. And you can see someone down here about the raise I talked about.